

Andy Barr: Religion and Political Ideology

On Monday, June 20, 2017, the St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church in Lexington held one of its Lenten Series entitled “Christian and Citizen.” Congressman Andy Barr was invited to speak that evening. Since religion is very important to many of Mr. Barr’s constituents in the 6th Congressional district, and he attends an Episcopalian church, I hoped to learn how his religious beliefs affect his political perspective. What follows are the questions asked, and notes I made about his answers. This is what I heard. Others in the audience might have heard something different. The third item in several of Mr. Barr’s responses is an opinion of what he said.

Members of the congregation submitted these questions prior to the June 20th meeting. I do not know if Mr. Barr had access to these questions before arrival at the church. Since he came late, the last question was not answered.

Each person arriving at the church was given a handout. It said “These questions are part of the Episcopal Church’s Baptismal Covenant, a series of promises every baptized Christian in the Episcopal Church makes at the time of her/his confirmation and reaffirms throughout the year.” The two questions and the appropriate answers were:

“QUESTION: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

ANSWER: I will, with god’s help.

QUESTION: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

ANSWER: I will, with God’s help.”

Here are the Questions and Andy Barr’s responses.

Question Number 1:

“Your website has information on several issues you support. Two of them-[T]erm Limits and Live by the Laws You Write, seemingly prohibiting Congress and their staffs from exempting themselves from federal laws they pass, like the current health act, address issues supported across political lines. What progress are you making on both potential laws?”

Barr’s Response to Question #1 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

- Respondent said he was one of the 25 co-sponsors of Term Limits bill. Stressed that there are 435 members of the House of Representatives.
- I was surprised that Andy Barr would support Term Limits. However, it is an impressive item to enter on your legislative record. Looks/sounds good-but in reality, passage of this bill has about as much chance to become law as a snowball being able to survive in Hades. If Andy Barr really believed in its contents, he would not be running in the coming election (and as he most likely plans to do in subsequent election cycles). Other politicians have said the same thing but they remain in office after numerous re-elections.
- I might have misunderstood his response to the “Live by the Laws You Write” item. Andy said one Democrat and one Republican co-sponsored this bill.

Andy was the Republican. Good for him if this is accurate. Don't know because he said nothing more about the issue.

Question #2:

“Share a time when you experienced the greatest dissonance between the teachings of Christ as your Episcopal tradition understands and the vote you cast on a particular issue.”

Barr's Response to Question #2 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

- The dissonance question encouraged Andy Barr to cite which bills (if any) posed a conflict with his religious beliefs.
- It is my impression that he did not answer the question. Andy talked about irrelevant subjects. Also said that Democrats and Republicans do cooperate. They do share common interests and goals if and when you get to know them (i.e., Democrats). So, can we conclude that Andy Barr experiences no dissonance/discomfort created by his voting record and his adherence to Episcopalian/Christian religious beliefs? And that he perceives no difference between what he and other Republicans advocate and Democrats as well?

Question #3:

“How do you ensure following the tenets of your Episcopal faith does not lead to legislation that impinges on the free practice of religion by followers of other faiths, Christians who have different understandings of Jesus' teachings, and those citizens who have no faith tradition?”

Barr's Response to Question #3 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

- Andy Barr replied that his religious beliefs permit no infringement. However, his response was non-specific. It was void of any examples from recent events in this country and elsewhere in the world.
- I conclude that Andy Barr is tolerant of faiths different from his, and accepts other branches of Christianity as being no less “valid,” or “worthy” than Episcopalian. Andy Barr is not a religious bigot.

Question #4:

“Do you consider access to health care, including mental health care and help for those struggling with addiction, a moral issue in which Christian teachings to heal the sick can offer guidance and insight for political policy, a privilege for those who can afford it, or a blend of the two? How have your votes on health care issues reflected this?”

Barr's Response to Question #4 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

- Andy says that “individuals are born free.” It is a firmly held moral idea for the man. Exactly what does “Health Care” means/entails is open to question.

Nonetheless, however defined, Health Care is a “scarce resource.” It requires money, and the “economic factor” is all-important for him. So, *how* to allocate this scarce resource is the big question.

Andy briefly discussed several options, this being 1.) Government/Single Payer program (paid by taxpayers); 2.) “Free market,” and 3.) Some government involvement, but with “free market” being the principal determinant. In other words, minimal supervision by government, but the “market” must determine the details.

Then, Andy mentioned the “Safety Net” issue. He said this is a “moral necessity” BUT whatever is involved also must be “cost effective.” He really stressed the idea of “cost effectiveness.” It is, for Mr. Barr, “unfair, immoral to bankrupt future generations,” and that “it is a moral obligation to practice fiscal discipline” [for any and all issues, because] “we must leave the world a better world.” I think Andy means we should strive to provide future generations a better place in which to live, and this can be accomplished by not spending money foolishly, unwisely, etc.

SO, what I conclude from Andy Barr’s comments is that he is not antagonistic to the *idea* of “Health Care” and to a “Safety Net.” However, financial feasibility governs *what is to be done*. My impression of Mr. Barr’s extended response to this question indicates he is aware of its importance to many of his constituents, but he believes that neither Health Care nor a Safety Net is an absolute right for all citizens regardless of cost. To think otherwise is unrealistic and unfair to the American taxpayer. And these are the people whom Andy says he is representing in the House of Representatives.

Question #5:

“While political appeal is complex, President Donald Trump garnered and continues to maintain the public support of a large proportion of Evangelical Christians. In your opinion, what [is it] about candidate Trump [that] resonated with faith beliefs of Evangelical Christians and what about him resonated with you personally as a Christian?”

Barr’s Response to Question #5 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

-The Episcopalian minister prefaced Andy’s response to the question by asking him this: “...why so much money for the military, and addiction [solution] remedy [being] secondary?” The minister was alluding to what seems to be minimal importance given to social issues in the federal budget allocation.

-Andy responded at length to this query. He first said that “common defense” (national defense?) is a constitutional requirement. Non-military concerns, however, are not the responsibility of government. By this Andy meant Health Care beyond some form of a Safety Net (his words).

He also told the audience about massive amounts of money for defense [being required] because “evil does exist.” Therefore, for Andy, a “moral and just defense [is] a necessity.” Again, it is mandated by the Constitution, and

this takes precedence over all else in which government is involved.

Andy's response continued. He told us Donald Trump's "base" (i.e., his most loyal followers or supporters) is indicative of "moral desperation." They are suffering. Andy does not disparage their feelings. Furthermore, Evangelicals do not condone all of Trump's ideas and behavior. The most important issue for the majority of President Trump's "base" is *who* is nominated for, and elected to, the Supreme Court. This, according to Andy, is *by far, either the most important, or the only issue* for Evangelicals.

Andy believes that Trump's "pragmatism" qualifies as one of the man's "virtues." This trait, he told us, attracted Democrats as well as Republicans. Trump, for many Americans, "is a man of action" and his ability to "shock [was] an attraction" to the mass of discontented citizens.

Now a bit more about Trump's "pragmatism." Andy also very briefly mentioned how the political climate of the recent past election can best be summarized as: "anxiety about the future versus depression of the present." I think this means that people/voters were willing to take a chance ("anxiety about the future") in preference to maintaining the status quo (the "depression of the present"). Trump (and/or his campaign managers) sensed this dichotomy and capitalized on the sentiment.

Although I do not think Andy really answered the question *as written*, I agree with *most* of what Andy said (cited above) in his non-answer/response. However, I do not understand how Donald Trump earns the label "pragmatic." For me a more appropriate term might be "opportunistic," even "cynical."

Question #6:

"How does your Episcopal faith address stewardship of the earth, and how have your votes reflected (or disagreed with) your faith's positions?"

Barr's Response to Question #6 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

-For Andy Barr, "stewardship of the earth is a noble sentiment" BUT, and it is an important BUT, the need to create jobs is more important. The best way to achieve this goal is to "embrace science." "Innovation" is the key; "big government" is not. The same thing applies to find a "solution to climate change." Innovation that is free of, independent from, the mandates of "big government" is the answer. So for Andy, "private enterprise, [and] markets will solve" the problem. He again stressed that "NO central planning," no government control is the solution. And the manner in which Andy responded to the question indicates, to me at least, that government and science are totally incompatible. One negates the other. You can't "do" science if you have government. They mix as well as oil and water.

The Episcopalian minister now asked Andy: why then, defund solar energy research/innovation/development plus other alternate/alternative energy sources?

-*My impression* from Andy's response? It was a repetition of what he said before. In brief, the *absence* of big government involvement in our society's energy

problems was akin to an article of faith for the man. Economic opportunity that enables people to achieve upward social mobility is possible. It will not be realized, however, by Government interference. This echoes, I think, the mantra heard before from many other politicians, certain media outlets, plus others: “Government is not the answer, government is the problem.” There is undeniably some truth to the claim. It also is simplistic.

Question #7:

“How do you think the First Amendment separation of Church and State/the Establishment Clause have been strengthened (creating a stronger separation) and weakened (allowing the Church and State to overlap) in the past decade?
How do you as a politician maneuver the admittedly complex path through religious involvement and influence in political issues?”

Barr’s Response to Question #7 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

-The Episcopalian minister prefaced Andy’s response by saying she believes “food is a [1st amendment] right.

Andy does not respond to this message, so I am not sure if he agrees with the minister. However, he does discuss religious intolerance, and he “rejects this toxic evil in the world.” I *think* he is arguing that the 1st amendment pertains most importantly to freedom of religion, of worship, and perhaps not questions about the allocation of food, and associated nutritional concerns.

He continues his response by saying that the USA “should NOT advocate moral relativism.” The word order is odd but Andy did emphasize the “NOT.” I think that by “moral relativism” he is referring to the notion that “anything goes,” or no standards, that anything-and-everything is permissible. He rejects such an idea. So do many people. However, past and present political and religious demagogues also use the phrase. It encourages their followers, their constituents, to insist that their way of life is the best, the only way to live. Cultural differences are not to be tolerated; they are to be condemned, and if necessary, people who continue to engage in such behavior are to be eliminated. I could provide our Congressman with lots of illustrations.

Andy Barr, therefore, preaches tolerance, but in this person’s opinion, it seems to be a very restricted appreciation of the term.

After Andy finishes commenting about relativism/relativity, he returns to the role of government when discussing the problem of “poverty.” He acknowledges its existence, but under no circumstances is it solved by “income re-distribution.” “Limited government” which is the ideal for Andy, is mandatory to solve the problem. He continues: the answer is “economic opportunity” which for Andy means “jobs.” He then talks about the “morality of capitalism,” about the many benefits of a “free market,” about “individualism,” and how “free enterprise [i.e., no government interference?] guarantees that “all people are helped.” Andy ends the commentary by telling us that “work” constitutes a “spiritual need,” and that work is a “moral foundation.”

Question #8:

“With what theological positions of the Episcopal church do you disagree? How do you reconcile this theological disagreement?”

Barr’s Response to Question #8 & Opinion/Comment About His Answer:

-Andy’s response to this question might have revealed the extent to which his political positions conflict, if at all, with tenets of the Episcopalian church. Unfortunately, Andy’s late arrival at the meeting precluded a response.

A FINAL COMMENT:

-Andy Barr’s answers to these questions leave me mystified. He seems to compartmentalize his religion and his political ideology. In other words, the tenets of the Episcopalian Church are subordinate to the tenets of Wall Street, and to the worship of unfettered, “free market” enterprise. In Congressman Barr’s world, “capitalism” as practiced in this country is the answer to everything. And in Andy’s universe, religion-be it Episcopalian or otherwise-is fine to think about but nothing more. Behaving like a devout Episcopalian *should* behave might sound good, but *actually doing so* when determining public policy is woefully idealistic, impractical, and it does nothing to solve the problems this country faces.

I hope I am wrong about Andy Barr’s answers to these questions. The man needs to clarify what he believes in because right now he appears to be a walking contradiction.

So-Andy, plan a Town Meeting that is open to the public, and do it soon. Discuss the same topics, but this time for a larger audience. The decisions you make in Washington, D.C. affect each one of your constituents in the 6th congressional district, and many of them take religion very seriously. Furthermore, for some of these folks, what you vote for, or do not vote for, is a matter of life or death, a question of financial solvency or homelessness. This is serious stuff, so act like a leader. We are waiting.

Paul Winther
Concerned Citizen-Fayette County
